

Dealing with Depression: A Christian Perspective

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Objective: Depression is a bio-psycho-socio-spiritual disorder. Depression inevitably forces people to face experiences of meaninglessness and hopelessness. In this overview, I intended to review Christian's aspect of spiritual care on depression, restoring meaning, purpose and hope for the depressed person. **Method:** Based on my practice of Christianity and psychiatry, I searched the literature on the topic area. **Results:** I first describe depressive feeling in those with Christian faith, and explained the importance of restoring the meaning in Christianity. Then, I deal with depression with eight aspects: (A) Jesus: a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief, (B) prayer: God as therapist, (C) Christian fellowship: a strong social support, (D) suffering: a blessing in disguise, (E) hope: enabling courage to live, (F) forgiveness: healing of trauma, (G) letting go: overcoming loss, and (H) love: overcoming learned helplessness. **Conclusion:** By adding Christian spiritual care to ordinary psychiatric treatments, Christians suffering with depression can get a holistic treatment for their depression.

Key words: Christian, spiritual care, meaning, hope
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Introduction

Depression is a serious mental disorder confronting an ever increasing number of persons in our contemporary society. It is so common that depression has been called the common cold of mental illness. This is an unfortunate analogy because such assumption can underplay the devastating effect that depression has on individuals and their families. Depression affects people from all backgrounds, and even those with great Christian spiritual leaders such as Martin Luther and Ignatius de Loyola [1].

Being a bio-psycho-socio-spiritual disorder, depression needs a holistic treatment of all these four aspects. Depression inevitably forces people to face experiences of meaninglessness and hopelessness with devastating consequences. Depression can be as a silent killer as many sufferers feel ashamed of admitting their own problem. Many Christians feel that they cannot speak of this particular illness lest they be thought a "bad Christian." As a Christian, one should always seek out doctor's advice when depression takes hold of one's life. During this time of spiritual darkness a good spiritual director is also vital [2, 3]. Thus, we can consider depression as a profoundly spiritual

illness, which can be helped through religious approach. In this paper, I would describe the feeling of depression in those with Christian faith, and stress the importance of restoring the meaning in Christianity before my focusing on the Christian aspects of spiritual care on depression.

Feeling the Deepest Dark Pit of Depression in Those with Christian Faith

In the depth of depression, you lose interest in everything around you including your family. The joy once you enjoyed for granted has all but disappeared. You feel no sense of God's presence or that He is hearing your cries for help. You also feel that God keeps silent in spite of your desperate praying and crying, and that as if being fallen into a deepest dark pit.

In a study of spirituality and depression, Swinton collected data using unstructured, in-depth interviews on six subjects, who had each experienced depression for at least two years. All participants were volunteers, committed to the Christian faith tradition and interested in spirituality. Eight central themes of spiritual significance were emerged from the data of this study: (A) the meaningless abyss of depression; (B) questioning everything; (C) abandonment by God and people; (D) clinging on through faith; (E) the desire to relate and the failure of relationship; (F) exhaustion, demoralization and feeling ground down; (G) trapped into living; and (H) the crucible of depression [4].

In that dark abyss, you would easily doubt about everything that previously gave life meaning and purpose. You will try to cling on something and desire to relate with outside world. Yet paradoxically, you doubt that such desire would work. Social withdrawal and disconnecting from

God are common feelings among the depressed. They experience feelings of abandonment by God and by those around them [5]. To take a true courage to wake up, those with depression will face the darkness of another day. Although your body is alive, you feel that your soul is dead, and that the tired mind longs for sleeping forever but not waking up. At this point of feeling being fallen in the deepest pit, the depressed think that suicide might become the first choice.

The Importance of Restoring Meaning in Christianity

Frankl argues that the search for meaning and purpose are fundamental dynamic forces for the development of mental health [6]. If life has meaning and purpose, then it is possible to cope with the considerable difficulties that depression imposed on a person's life. Spiritual faith in the context of organized religion can provide the channel for restoring meaning, purpose and hope to a person's life through the power of liturgy and worship. Many get help from the Bible, particularly the Job and the Psalms of lament.

Swinton pointed out in his study that "It is the experience of relating to and identifying with figures within scripture that provides him with the template for making sense of his own situation and his current relationships with God, self and others. The act of reading scripture is as much an emotional/relational experience as a cognitive learning task [7]." In the experiences of Psalmists and Job, the depressed find a similar doubts and questions. Through the experience of relating to and identifying with the figures of the Bible, the depressed find a resolution that involves in a return to God.

Eight Christian Aspects of Spiritual Care on depression

Many studies on spirituality and depression have confirmed positive effect of religious involvement in treating and preventing depression [8-10]. Koenig et al. in a comprehensive overview of the topic to critically examine 100 studies dealing with the association between religion and well-being [11]. They reported that being religious might enhance a sense of hope that could possibly influence rates of depression [11]. Koenig and his Duke University research team members carried out a study on depression and religion between November 1993 and March 1996. This is the first “prospective” investigation to examine the effects of religiosity on speed of recovery from clinically significant depressive disorder of men and women over 60 years of age. They revealed that an active religious life can both shield people from depression and reduce its toll in terms of physical health [12]. Dein in a review paper reported that “The literature suggests that those who are religious have lower incidence of depressive symptoms/ depression and that being religious may increase the speed of recovery from depressive disorder [13].”

Christian’s aspects of spiritual care on depression is aimed at restoring meaning, purpose and hope for the depressed. I will discuss them as followed:

Jesus: a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief

For the depressed person, “understanding” is the most important thing they want in “spiritual care” [14]. We know that those who could give most effective care are those who had experienced suffering themselves. The depressed need a God

not from somewhere high above and distant, but rather a God stands close to them. Jesus Christ is the God once became like a human being and had experienced depression himself.

According to the descriptions of the Holy Bible, the final days of Jesus in Jerusalem were full of events and disasters. Just before Jesus was arrested, he went with his disciples to a garden Gethsemane to pray. At that time Jesus began to show grief and distress of mind and was deeply depressed. The Bible describes it as in the following: “In great anguish, he prayed even more fervently; his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground [15].” And on the cross just before he died, Jesus cried out with a loud shout “My God, my God, why did you abandon me? [16]” Here we see that Jesus’ depression was the same mental anguish, sorrow and dejection that we feel at times. “In his life on earth Jesus made his prayers and requests with loud cries and tears to God, who could save him from death [17].”

Jesus cried and shed tears in the face of crises. Jesus felt troubled, forsaken and depressed in the face of crises. Jesus released tension unashamedly through loud crying and shedding tears. Mohline et al. mentioned in their book that Jesus gave these “appropriate for the occasion” models of crying and shedding tears for Christians, men or women, to follow even in public [18]. Christian with depression would be comforted and encouraged by the fact that their Lord Jesus had experienced the depression and defeated the depression.

Prayer: God as therapist

Prayer is a conversation and communication with God. Two core principles lay at the heart of prayer: human freedom (intentionality) and human relating to the Divine (transcendence). Prayer is a relational experience. Prayer links the human

relating to God, and the freedom of human choice or intentionality in that relating [19]. A depressed Christian can follow the way of Jesus by making one's prayers and requests with loud cries and tears to God. Once you start to pray, you are no longer alone in this world. You have got a trustworthy one to hear your cries.

Personally, I take prayer as a special form of psychotherapy. It is a 24-hour, free walk-in clinic and God is the therapist. To get benefit from prayer, you have to practice prayer constantly before you get depressed. Otherwise, you could not pray when you were fallen in the deepest dark pit of depression [20].

Christian fellowship: a strong social support

A network of supportive relationships is beneficial for the prevention and treatment of depression. Frequent religious involvement is associated with more extensive social support networks and more extensive social support is consistently found to be connected with a variety of positive physical and psychological health outcomes.

According to Larson's 2003 report at Australian 10th Annual Suicide Prevention National Conference [21], persons who both participated in a religious group and highly valued their religious faith are at a substantially reduced risk of depressive disorder while people with no religious link may raise their relative risk of major depression by as much as 60%. Lack of organizational religious involvement is linked with a 20%-60% increase in the odds of experiencing a major depressive episode. Valuing one's religious faith as centrally important and actively belonging to a religious group may give a spiritual basis for meaning and support from others, potentially giving hope and caring to protect against depression [22]. Among those who had been depressed at the

beginning of the study, those who have ranked their religious faith as highly important recover faster from their depression [23].

Suffering: a blessing in disguise

Christians are familiar with verses from the Holy Bible: "We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him [24]", and "We also boast of our troubles because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance brings God's approval, and approval creates hope [25]." Cardinal Bernardin pointed out in his book *The Gift of Peace* that for Christians, suffering is in communion with the Lord [26]. He stated in his book that in many ways Jesus Christ experienced pain and suffering more deeply than Christians will ever know. Yet in the face of it all, Jesus Christ transformed human suffering into something greater: an ability to walk with the afflicted. As Christians, you must first come to terms with suffering if you are to love as Jesus Christ loved. For Christians, suffering is a gift and blessing from God in disguise. If you take suffering as a gift and blessing from God in disguise, you will look on suffering as a friend rather than an enemy. Depression is a real suffering. Yet for those who love God, depression is a stepping stone for spiritual growth. Depression still has its positive meaning. Through the experience of depression, you would become more sensitive and helpful to people who are suffering from depression. Such experience will become a blessing both to you yourself and those who were depressed [27].

Hope: enabling courage to live

During World War II, Frankl was a prisoner at a German concentration camp and Moltmann a prisoner at a British camp. Since World War II, Frankl has helped so many people through his theory and practice of "logotherapy" [28], while

Moltmann has influenced Christianity through his 1967 book *Theology of Hope* [29].

They both observed that their fellow prisoners who had hope could cope the best. Hope gave prisoners-of-war courage to live, made them survive. As a leading proponent of the theology of hope, Moltmann believes that God's promise to act in the future is more important than the fact that he has acted in the past. What is implied by this focus on the future, however, is not withdrawal from the world in the hope that better world will somehow evolve, but active participation in the world in order to aid in the coming of that better world. He proposes that Christian hope should be the central motivating factor in the life and thought of the church and of each Christian. For Moltmann, the whole creation longs for the renewal by the "God of Hope." Empowered by hope, the Christian's response should therefore involve: mission of the church to all nations, the hunger for righteousness in the world, and love for the true life of the imperiled and impaired creation. This hope can help people to have courage to live and expectation for the coming of a better world.

Forgiveness: healing of trauma

Jesus teaches His followers to pray by saying: "Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us [30]." Jesus put his teaching into action even when he was being hanged on the cross by saying: "Forgive them, Father! They do not know what they are doing [31]." Forgiveness is an important but is also a hard lesson for Christian to learn. Forgiveness does not come easy for most of us. Our human instinct is seeking pleasure and avoiding suffering. Naturally we draw back in self-protection when we have been injured. For Christian, forgiveness is a choice we make through a decision of our will, motivated by obedience to God

and his command to forgive. Since forgiveness goes against our nature, we must forgive by faith.

Unforgiveness leads to retenting and withholding negative emotions, like anger, hatred and feeling of revenge [32]. Unforgiveness is bound to set you becoming prisoner of anger and hurt. On the other hand, forgiveness leads to release of these negative emotions, and brings peacefulness, contentment and empathy [33].

Forgiveness is a way of letting go of the anger and hurt and ultimately a way of improving our health and immune system functioning [www.medscape.com/viewarticle/742198]. Those who hold on anger and hurt, tend to have poor health, a weakened immune system, and are prone to having chronic illness. This is due to a rise in the level of stress hormone cortisol that suppresses the immune system. Forgiveness therapy involves in speaking your truth and letting go of anger and hurt (in the absence of the person you are forgiving). You can speak your truth in a letter (without sending it) to the person you are seeking to forgive, or in a role-play setting. Forgiveness is the right thing to do for physical, social and spiritual reasons [34].

Once you have truly forgiven, you will get the above-mentioned benefit of forgiveness. How will you know that you have truly forgiven? Corrie Ten Boom, a Christian woman who survived a Nazi concentration camp during the holocaust, said: "Forgiveness is to set a prisoner free, and to realize the prisoner was you (<http://Christianity.about.com/od/holidaytips/p/keepingchristmas.htm>)." You will know the work of forgiveness is complete when you experience the freedom that comes as a result. You are the ones who suffer most when you choose not to forgive. When you forgive, The Lord sets your hearts free from the anger, bitterness, resentment, and hurt that previously imprisoned you.

True forgiveness is a slow process. Jesus' disciple Peter once came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?" "No, not seven times," answered Jesus, "but seventy times seven [35]." It means that you have to practice it repeatedly until your heart feels free from the anger, bitterness, resentment, and hurt.

Letting go: overcoming loss

Grief and depression are two related but different responses that are frequently confused each other. Grief is the body's normal response to a loss. After experiencing a major loss, many people experience an intense emotional and physical response which may come in waves and is not present all the time. Most people can adjust to the death or loss. With time, the grieving person learns to adjust to their life that has been changed by the death or loss. When the normal grief response does not improve within four weeks of the loss, or the symptoms get worse, present nearly every day and persist for the majority of the day, it should raise the concern that the person may be developing a clinical depression.

The Bible teaches that "Each one, as a good manager of God's different gifts, must use for the good of others the special gift he has received from God [36]." For a Christian, it implies that you are just a manager of God in this world but not the owner of what you have. When facing the loss, you consider it as returning what you have been trusted to your Master. So we read from Job, that after his children and wealth are destroyed within one day, Job got up and tore his clothes in grief. He shaved his head and threw himself face downward on the ground. He said, "I was born with nothing, and I will die with nothing. The Lord gave, and now he has taken away [37]."

After experiencing such a major loss, Job did manifest severe emotional and physical symptoms which were quite like those experiences of depression. Job argued with his friends and God for what happened on him. Through the process of his quest, Job was healed and got over the depression. This sort of Christian faith helps one to cope with the major loss by letting go. Such attitude reduces the risk of developing into complicated grief (a clinical depression). For the Christian, owning nothing do not mean that you have nothing. Jesus told his follower that, "If any of you want to come with me, you must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me [38]." And he also said, "Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lie down and rest [39]." Mother Teresa's worked at Calcutta and witnessed "God uses nothingness to show his greatness [40]."

Love: overcoming learned helplessness

A learned helplessness is a condition where a person has learned to act helpless [41]. This motivational problem causes an individual who has failed over and over in the past to believe that he/she cannot do better. This feeling of inadequacy and perceived loss of control can lead to depression. A common feeling that accompanies depression is that of being trapped in an intolerable situation. The depressed person can often see two alternatives, but neither of which is possible, and without change the existing situation is too painful. All often, this feeling leads to suicide as the depressed person feels that their situation is insoluble by themselves or others. Christians suffer depression will also experience this intolerable situation. But Christians believe that God is love. God looks after everyone and cherishes even the smallest and weakest one. As the Bible says, "For when we were still helpless, Christ died for the wicked

at the time that God chose [42].” Even in the depth of depression, the knowledge of Jesus once lived in this world, experienced depression and overcame it, will encourage and give strength to the believer.

Conclusion

Being a bio-psycho-socio-spiritual disorder, depression needs a holistic treatment of all these four aspects. So far, psychiatric treatment on depression has focused on bio-psycho-social dimensions and spiritual intervention is relatively unexplored. For Christian suffering with depression, “understanding” is the most important thing they want in terms of “spiritual care.” The depressed person needs a God not from high above and distant, but rather a God stands close to them. For Christian, Jesus Christ is the God once became like a human being and had experienced depression himself. Through prayer, social support from Christian fellowship, taking suffering as a gift and blessing from God in disguise, hope that leads to courage to live and expectation for the coming of a better world, forgiveness that leads to healing of trauma, letting go to overcome loss, and love to overcome learned helplessness, the depressed Christian can restore their meaning, purpose and hope in life.

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